

STORYTELLING FOR INCLUSION

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Introduction

Storytelling accompanies the evolution of the human race, and bears witness to both its identity and culture. For a long time, it has represented a sort of “oral encyclopedia” which, through narrative, has passed down from generation to generation traditions, customs and knowledge (Halverson, 1992). The role that storytelling played, even before the discovery of writing, in the diffusion of knowledge, in the construction of interpersonal relationships and in the birth of new societies, is well known. Without doubt writing is the earliest “technology” invented by man, through which culture and knowledge have been passed down over time, after having been transmitted orally for a long time. According to Barthes and Duisit (1975), in fact, storytelling begins with the same story of the human race, almost as if to represent an ontogenetically distinctive trait of the species, which unites *homo sapiens* with the *homo digitalis* of today’s society (Montag & Diefenbach, 2018). Other authors (Kenyon *et al.*, 1996) argue that men and women not only have stories to tell, but that they are the stories they tell. Storytelling, therefore, always reinterprets in a new way and with different tools a natural propensity of human beings to tell about themselves, to build memories capable of projecting the past into the future.

This contribution investigates to what extent a particular type of storytelling, the so-called “social stories”, can represent tools to promote school

and social inclusion of children and young people with high functioning autism.

Storytelling as a prosocial action

For Oatley (2016) storytellings are simulations of social worlds, capable of developing skills of socialization and communication that the story-listener acquires and consolidates progressively by adapting them to various contexts. By coming into contact with the stories, the child discovers new emotions, how to manage them and how to regulate their own behaviour. Oatley believes, in fact, that storytelling, in addition to simulating social worlds, simulates people in social interactions, since it tests not only the understanding of the content of the stories but also the empathic understanding of the child compared to the feelings of other people in the stories. This empathic understanding is due both to the listener's personal involvement in the stories, which activates cognitive deductions, emotional implications, translations of meanings from the storytelling to their own experience, and to the storytelling content conveyed by the characters of the stories that may be more or less closely linked to the listener's experience or refer to completely different worlds, even imaginary. Storytelling can therefore be an instrument that favours the knowledge of oneself and of others in well-defined times and places, but also an instrument of projection of oneself into completely unexplored worlds. Storytelling contemplates reality and imagination, in a temporal discontinuity that sees the present as a consequence of the actions of the past, but also as a springboard to get in touch with the future and worlds, that realistically do not exist (yet), but that exist in the mind of the one who thinks about them (Dunbar, 2012).

Regarding the relationship between storytelling and reality, Hakemulder (2000) underlines the social and transformative effect of narratives. In his studies he defines narrative fiction as a moral and social laboratory, because through storytelling it is possible to affect the present and the real society, as happened for example in Algeria, at the beginning of the century where the life experience narratives told by Algerian women have helped reduce prejudice toward the relationship between men and wom-

en within Algerian society and beyond. Through storytelling it is possible to accelerate social change, until what was imagined before becomes reality. As regards the relationship between storytelling and imagination, coming into contact with the characters of the stories helps people to “put themselves in someone’s else shoes”, identifying themselves with the situations experienced by others; in this way, through storytelling, empathy, sharing and understanding of other people’s experiences and feelings are achieved, preparing the ground for the communicative relationship and for learning about and through emotions. Oatley (2016) sees in storytelling a way to simulate new social worlds, in a certain sense the narrations act as forerunners of socio-relational and emotional experiences that the subject will have to put in place in real contexts. The studies of Black and Barnes (2015) go in this direction. Their research has shown an increase in empathic competences generated by the encounter with stories. For example, it has emerged that watching a drama TV series significantly increases the test scores which measure the degree of empathy, while this does not occur after watching a documentary, confirming the impact that the narrative can have on the development of social and emotional skills in the subjects. Oatley (2016) also maintains that stories generate a sense of “shared humanity” in the user, since people activate fusional or oppositional relations with the narrative characters. These relationships are defined as parasocial because they are one-way: the characters in the stories do not really interact with the readers or listeners, who in any case establish an empathetic bond with them. This empathic bond has a profound value for the readers/listeners because in this way they develop self-awareness of their own social, emotional and relational potential, and of their ability to show it in specific social contexts. Storytelling invites us to take part in events and experience multiple emotions through the characters. When we come into contact with a narrative we can remain ourselves or identify with one of the characters in the story. As social beings we do not lead a single life: stories allow us to live multiple lives, they allow us to be in contact with multiple meanings, which we can share or reject. The psychological and emotional complexity of the characters in the stories helps users of storytelling to elaborate new ideas and emotions, sometimes more complex than they were before the narration, and it is at this stage that the subject develops new learning (Brown, 2015).

As Frijda (1969) says, through storytelling, emotional conditions are simulated which later will be translated into concrete actions/behaviors. Emotions are mentally endowed with coherent psychological functions that prepare to action. An emotional state can produce - even involuntary - a consequent action, thereby the simulation of an emotion thanks to the storytelling corresponds to the simulation of an action, so the experience of an emotion in the fictional context of the narrations can be intended as a preparatory exercise to experience emotions in real situations. According to Frijda, the connection between experiencing an emotion and triggering an action related to it involves the following phases: a) codification of the event; b) evaluation of the type of emotions generated by the event; c) evaluation of the meaning and intensity of the emotions generated by the event; d) preparation for action; e) action. Within this process, storytelling can represent both the tool through which the child experiences new emotions and also the tool that allows the children to regulate their behavior, controlling their actions/re-actions.

Based on this, the importance that storytelling can have in the structuring of human adaptive behaviour and in the recognition and management of the emotions underlying them is evident.

High-end autistic children

The use of storytelling as a tool to educate to the discovery of one's own and others' emotions and to the implementation of adaptive behaviors, may seem inappropriate for those who present a functional diversity in the understanding of prosocial narrative. The reference concerns mainly the people that the *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorder - DSM-IV* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) places in the so-called autistic spectrum. Here we will refer above all to children who fall into the high-end band of the spectrum. In this regard, Hans Asperger (1944), in the first half of the 1940s, identified a typology of children, defined as *Autistischen Psycopathen*, characterized by compulsive interests, relational attitude, linguistic peculiarities, mannerisms and clumsiness, or cases of autism without cognitive disability. In the same years, the father of American paedopsychiatry, Leo Kanner (1943) conducted his research on autistic children with severe cognitive impairment.

In the 1980s Lorna Wing rediscovered Hans Asperger's studies working with children with the same problems and in 1994 what is now known as Asperger's syndrome was better described in the DSM-IV. In May 2013, with the fifth edition of the DSM, Asperger's syndrome disappears as a diagnosis and is included in the high-end band autism spectrum (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Starting from the Asperger's studies, Wing (1981) summarizes the characteristics of this syndrome in the following points:

- Language: time of acquisition in the norm even if it presents specific traits, such as the wrong use of pronouns, replacement of the second or third person with the first; tendency to a repetitive and stereotyped use of language; presence of echolalia; excessive interest in puns; difficulty in understanding metaphors and double meanings.
- Non-verbal communication: lack of facial expression, except in the case of strong emotions; monotonous, mechanical or exaggerated verbal tone; limited or excessive mimicry, usually inconsistent with the sense of speech; poor understanding of other people's expressions and non-verbal messages.
- Repetitive activities and resistance to change: attention to repetitive and routine activities; annoyance towards any form of change, even if minimal, concerning the arrangement of objects in space; poor perception of the passage of time and duration of activities.
- Motricity coordination: clumsiness, inadequate postures, stereotyped movements.
- Skills and interests: Asperger's syndrome presents particularly developed skills linked to the use of memory; limited and morbid interests towards specific topics (from the case studies emerges a widespread interest in astronomy, geology, history, genealogy, which are flanked in everyday life by exasperated attention to the routes of public transports, trains, television series, etc.).
- Social interaction: inability to manage habitual social behaviour; relational problems linked to the dialectic of the gaze, to the rhythms and times of the speech, to the attention to the interlocutor; inability to use

appropriately social codes such as clothing or postures in public contexts.

School is one of the first social contexts in which the eccentricity and non-compliance with the social rules of the subject with Asperger's syndrome are manifested in all their criticality. Compared to Asperger's research, the studies conducted by Wing add further peculiar traits, such as:

- lack of attention to the surrounding world during the early years of life; absence of communication, absence of laughter, smiles and other typical manifestations of early childhood; lack of interest in showing games and objects to parents; absence of symbolic games, which, if present, are rigid and stereotyped and do not provide the involvement of peers;
- development of language is not always early and brilliant, behind an adequate grammar and a rich vocabulary for the age of reference, the language used is usually copied inappropriately by other people or from books; many subjects with Asperger's syndrome know the meaning of obsolete and technical terms, but often do not understand the sense of common use terms.

After the inclusion of Asperger's syndrome in the DSM-IV, there has been a sharp increase in the diagnosis of this type of autism, usually considered more acceptable by parents because it is less stigmatizing and characterized by a high cognitive functioning.

Social stories to promote the inclusion of children with Asperger's syndrome

Prosocial storytelling may seem impractical for the design and implementation of inclusive educational actions for high-end autistic pupils. To be considered inclusive an educational action must be able to promote the presence, participation and progress of learning (Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006); developing these three dimensions through storytelling could be very difficult in subjects with significant disorders related to the sphere of interaction and communication. Despite this, there are forms of storytelling, called "social stories" (Gray & Garand, 1993), that can encourage the progressive inclusion of children with autism and the maturation of

adaptive behaviors to be used both at school and outside. Social stories are highly structured narratives, functional to foster the construction of social relationships based on the understanding of the rules that underlie all types of relationship/ interaction. They are stories that highlight the expected social behaviors, motivations and goals. As Lorimer and co-workers (2002) argue, in children with autism these kinds of stories serve to reduce aggressive behaviour, to teach social skills, appropriate attitudes, to acquire forms of greetings, to start play activities, etc., and to help children with autism to learn how to behave.

Gray (2000) defined social stories as simple descriptions, supported by photos or drawings, that serve to describe a person, an event, a concept, a social situation and that guide the child towards the acquisition of a rule of conduct to be adapted to an ordinary social situation. They are stories that have to be written considering the needs of the child (Gray & Garand, 1993), have a simple syntactic structure and are short-lived. They help children with autism to understand social situations that usually generate anxiety and stress in them, can be used to prevent, contain, manage and extinguish disruptive, explosive and violent behavioral reactions. In social stories, narration is used to educate the autistic child to reach an objective that is interesting or gratifying for him/her, to satisfy his/her need through the implementation of behaviours appropriate to the situation, to support the child in the phases of carrying out a task until it is autonomous and able to carry out it on its own. The use of social stories makes it easy for the autistic child to understand the sub-actions that make up the practice of a behavior, since precise information is provided on who, what, when, where and why certain steps have to be followed. Social stories are often used even before the child is involved in an educational activity, so as to prepare him/her and put him/her in a position to understand and manage the situation he/she will face later (Ozdemir, 2010).

According to Gray and Garand (1993) a social story, intended as a sort of storytelling, should include four types of phrases:

1. descriptive sentences, which provide information on who is involved in the story, where and when the facts occur, what happens and why. For example: *"The bell rings when the school break is over. Children stand in line near the door. They wait for the teacher to come";*

2. guidance sentences, explaining to the child what is expected of him / her and how he / she should behave in a given situation. In this case, using the first person, the following propositions are used: *“When the bell rings, I will try to stop to do what I was doing. I’ll line up. I’ll wait for my teacher”*;
3. prospective sentences, describing what other people may feel or think. For example: *“The teacher will be happy to see all the children in line”*;
4. affirmative sentences, used to help the child remember the story better or to reiterate the underlying teaching of the story itself in terms of the behaviour to be acquired. For example: *“Many people wear bike helmets. This is an intelligent thing to do”*.

The articulation of these types of phrases within the story and the frequency with which they should be re-proposed are important aspects. In fact, on a structural level, a social history should include a ratio from 2 to 5 descriptive, prospective and/or affirmative sentences for each directive sentence. While the first three set the context, the directive sentence highlights the main lesson, namely the appropriate behaviour that the child should acquire. The structure of the text can be enriched with images and drawings so as to involve more channels and communication codes. The choice of narrative parts of the text and images should respect the child’s reading ability, attention time and cognitive abilities. The title of the social story should include the general idea of the story, and like the structure of any narrative, the social story should include an introductory and a concluding part. The social story is written in the first person. The story should include the use of linguistic expressions that avoid as much as possible rigid and deterministic behaviors towards which the autistic child is brought to by its nature. In this regard, it is advisable to use words such as “sometimes”, “usually”, instead of “always”, “never”, etc. Once the story has been told, to check if the child has understood its content, some questions can be asked or the teacher can invite the child to repeat what they remember of the story, providing appropriate prompts to support the reconstruction of the story sequences. Social stories should not be reduced to a list of behaviours that the child has to put in place, but should provide a basic “narrative plot” capable of

describing the events/actions of the story, the general idea that one wants to develop, the behaviour that one wants to make acquire and therefore what is the purpose of the story (Kuttler, Myles & Carlson, 1998). The following are the cases of three autistic children proposed by Kuoch and Miranda (2003) in which social stories were used. For each case, the subjects for whom the social stories were conceived, the synthetic description of the situation-problem to be solved, the adaptive behaviours to be developed and the contexts in which the social stories were applied are presented.

Andrew, 3 years old. In this case the social stories were elaborated to decrease the aggressive behaviours, cries and screams that the child showed when he was usually asked to share some games with his older brother. Henry, 5 years old. The social story focused on the child's eating behaviour, and the fact that he used to shout and cry during breaktime and lunchtime, as well as repeatedly putting his hands in his pants or genital areas. Neil, 6 years old. In this case, the social story addressed the problems that arose whenever the child played with his classmates. In these cases, he used to cheat, make negative comments on defeat and have oppositional behaviors.

Andrew's intervention was carried out at his home, together with his mother. Data was collected while the child was playing on the floor or at the table with his brother. The games to be shared were varied from day to day (jungle animals, plasticine, etc.). For Henry, the intervention was carried out at lunchtime during his pre-school summer program. It took place in a room with six other children and one adult, all sitting at the same table. For Neil, the activity was conducted together with 20 other children playing on the floor or on the table with card games such as "Go Fish", "Memory", etc.

In all three cases the social stories were planned to intervene on the dysfunctional behaviors manifested by the children, taking into account their interests, the skills they already possessed and the initial degree of cognitive and socio-relational development. These aspects were collected through in-field systematic observations and interviews reserved to reference figures (parents, teachers, social workers, neuropsychiatrists,

etc.), conducted before the presentation of the social stories. The degree of appreciation and involvement of children in the use of social stories was evaluated through the Picture Communication Symbol (PCS) (Johnson, 1994), thanks to the use of graphic indicators of satisfaction (“happy face” / “sad face”). The social stories proposed included the dysfunctional behaviors referred TO above for each child and in the body of the narrative; for each of them instructions were given on how to deal with them through the implementation of socially correct behavior, appropriate to the context of reference. The reading of each social story lasted about 3-4 minutes, including comments on the photos chosen to accompany the narrative. At the end of each story the teacher reminded the child of the behaviour that would be expected of him, in the case of Neil, for example, he was reminded: *“As happens in the story that was told to you, play without quarrelling with other children, do not beat your mates and do not cheat!”*. For any good behaviour manifested in play situations similar to those described in the social history, verbal feedbacks of approval were given to the pupil, as reinforcement for the good result achieved. The social history selected for each case was read repeatedly, whenever children were involved in working activities in which the application of the adaptive behaviour to be acquired was required.

Conclusions

The use of social stories can be considered a good practice to be used with high functioning autistic children, because through their habitual and systematic use, the child gradually learns to develop awareness of himself, other people and the world around him. In this way the distance between the child’s inner and outer worlds decreases and education becomes a device for social inclusion and learning achievement. Through social stories, the storytelling contributes to the structuring of effective action patterns, to the internalization of rules, conducts and adaptive behaviors to be held in all those situations that involve social interactions. The communicative and socio-relational difficulties that characterize autism, even for the cases with Asperger’s syndrome, can be countered through social stories, thanks to the shaping function that the narrative has on human behavior.

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